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A Fish Story In the Making Off Nicaragua

The Reagan administration was embarrassed earlier this year when it was revealed that the CIA had been directly involved in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors—without adequately informing congressional oversight committees.

Now there's a bizarre possibility that the Navy may be planning to take over the CIA's dirty work, using one of its least known weapons: trained dolphins. The hint of dolphin use off Nicaragua was contained in a secret directive sent out by the chief of naval operations. It ordered that "Navy Marine mammal capability" be expanded to include the Atlantic Ocean.

Does this portend flippered forays against Soviet-bloc ships carrying munitions to the embattled Sandinista regime in Managua? The Navy won't say.

But dolphins do have certain advantages over CIA hirelings sowing mines from speedboats. They're smarter than a floating mine—and if they're captured, no amount of KGB-style interrogation can make them talk.

My sources suggest that the prin-

cipal reason for deploying dolphins in the Atlantic, though, is to protect our own ships. The Navy has a substantial flotilla patrolling the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, keeping an eye on the Sandinistas and on munitions shipments from Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The amazing dolphins, with their built-in sonar, chalked up an impressive record against enemy frogmen during the Vietnam war. From their underwater lairs at Cam Ranh Bay, they would be unleashed to find enemy demolition experts, whom they would dispatch with special hypodermic needles attached to carbon dioxide cartridges. The enemy frogmen would be impaled on the needles and blown up by the CO₂.

Over a 15-month period, dolphins killed about 60 North Vietnamese divers—and two Americans who accidentally got in their way.

Insiders told my associates Donald Goldberg and Dale Van Atta that the use of trained dolphins in Latin America isn't a new idea. According to one CIA whistle blower, who talked to congressional investigators, the agency, which developed dolphin training to a fine art in the 1960s, tried to sell killer dolphins to several Latin American countries several years ago. The prospective purchasers included Mexico, Peru, Brazil and Argentina. Apparently they weren't interested.

As I first reported three years ago,

the CIA has been concerned about the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet "dolphin gap." For nearly 20 years the Soviets have been developing their own dolphin program, including "the potential benefits of developing acoustical jamming countermeasures" to U.S. dolphins.

The Soviets' interest apparently was piqued in 1965 by the Navy's project involving "Tuffy," a bottlenose dolphin that carried tools and messages to Sea Lab II aquanauts 200 feet down off La Jolla, Calif. A minor mystery of that project is that, while Tuffy's feats were sworn to be authentic, the film footage of his diving released to the public was faked—shot in an indoor studio where the water was clearer.

But the Soviets were quick to detect a weapons gap, and began intensive research on dolphin technology. As a CIA report notes, one important use of trained dolphins is to attach "intelligence collection packages and other devices to enemy submarines." So the Soviets have been concentrating on jamming devices that would thwart U.S. dolphins.